Skill

May 10, 2006

Focus on your breathing, wherever you feel the breathing. In other words, wherever there are sensations in the body that let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Focus on those sensations. It could be a sensation of the air coming in and out through the nostrils, or the movement of the shoulders, the movement of the chest, the diaphragm—anywhere in the body at all. Notice when those sensations are comfortable and when they’re not. If they’re comfortable, keep them going. If they’re not, you can change them. This is where the element of skill comes into the practice. If you’ve ever developed a skill of any kind, whether it’s cooking or carpentry or any physical or mental skill, think of what’s involved. One, you’ve got preexisting conditions—in other words, things as they are, the raw materials you’re working with—and then there’s what you’re doing with them. And then there’s your ability to notice results of what you’re doing with them. So here you’ve got the breath. That’s your raw material. Sometimes it’s comfortable, sometimes it’s not. But you can do things with it and then learn to read the results. And it’s a process of trial and error. Sometimes you get it into your head that really long breathing would have to be good, and you just stick with a really long breath. And you don’t notice the results that you’re getting until it’s obviously not working. So the next time around, you try to be more sensitive. Keep this up, and eventually staying with the breath will become a skill. Always keep this point in mind. All the Buddhist teachings are centered around this issue of skill. Skillfulness and unskillfulness. There’s a sutta where Sariputta says that Right View starts with this question of what’s skillful and what’s unskillful, and what in the mind causes skillful behavior and what in the mind causes unskillful behavior. And then as he explains Right View, you discover that a lot of teachings come out from that one point. So this is the amount of Right View you need to know right now. The Buddha said the path starts with Right View. For some of us, that’s intimidating, because there are lots of books on some very abstruse topics—dependent co-arising, all the ins and outs of the Buddhist teachings—that are essentially questions of Right View. But keep in mind, it all comes down to this issue of what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. And when you approach the meditation as a skill, you start getting results. Always keep in mind that every moment you’re not just watching things passively, but you’re actually doing something to shape the moment. This is true whether you’re conscious of it or not, whether you’re meditating or not. The mind shapes its reality. You’ve got those raw materials coming in from the past karma you’ve done, and you’ve got your present intentions, and you’ve got the result of your present intentions. That’s what the present moment is. As we’re meditating, we’re learning how to read that. And to read that, you’ve got to keep that point in mind. These are your raw materials—the breath, what you’ve got in the present moment. In order to learn about intention, you set up very consciously an intention in the mind, one you’re going to try to stick with. That way, you begin to see other intentions that were less obvious, things that slip in from underground. It’s like putting a dam across a river. It’s only when you actually try to put up the dam that you realize how strong the currents at the base of the river are. So here you set up the dam to channel your energies. You’re going to focus on the breath. Any other intention that comes up right now, you don’t need it. One of the skills you’re going to have to learn as you meditate is learning how to ward off those other intentions. They’re going to come. Don’t get upset when they do. Just look at it as a challenge. Again, it’s a question of trial and error. You’re going to get knocked off course, for sure. The question is whether you’re going to just get upset about it or whether you’re going to say, “Well, that one mistake, chalk it up to experience and go back and try again.” Your ability to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back with that original intention, that’s what’s going to make all the difference in developing this skill. Have a cheerful attitude about what you’re doing. Many times we’re afraid of making mistakes, either because we’re used to getting scolded for mistakes or we’re used to having a record kept of all our mistakes. That’s what our grades were in grade school, a record of our mistakes that was passed on from grade school to high school. So we get timid about making mistakes. When you’re timid in that way, you never learn. Have a healthy attitude towards your mistakes. Everybody makes them. The question is how you react to them. If you can get the “you” out of the mistake and just simply look at it as an action that didn’t get the results you wanted, then you can go back and try to figure out what would be a better way of approaching it. Use your imagination. For example, if focusing at the breath in the nose doesn’t seem right, well, you can focus other places as well. If long breathing doesn’t feel good, you can try short breathing. You can try deep, shallow, heavy or light, broad or narrow. There are lots of ways of playing with the breath. You can think soft breath or heavy breath and see what works. In this way, you’re developing right view without really being conscious of it. Everything in the practice is a question of skill or lack of skill. Even your views can either be skillful or unskillful. Your desires can be skillful or unskillful. Your likes and dislikes can be skillful or unskillful. How do you know? By checking to see what the results are. Look at everything in terms of cause and effect. That’s where the question of skill comes in. There are some actions you do that are going to lead to stress and suffering. Other actions are going to lead to the end of suffering. Those are the basic terms of the Four Noble Truths right there. That’s what you’re keeping in mind as you’re practicing. This is something that’s called appropriate attention. The Buddha once said that he didn’t see any other factor in the mind that was more important for awakening than this factor of appropriate attention. You’re looking at things in terms of skill, lack of skill, cause and effect, starting with something very simple like the breath. As you get more acquainted with the breath, you begin to realize there are skillful ways of breathing. There are skillful ways of thinking about the breathing. There are skillful ways of visualizing the breath. There are also unskillful ways. Then it’s up to you to figure out which is which. This is how your insight develops, how your discernment develops. As you get more sensitive to issues of skill and lack of skill in the breath, you begin to see the mind as well. There are skillful qualities in the mind and unskillful qualities in the mind. The more you pursue those qualities, the more you begin to sense which is which. Some ways of thinking, some attitudes, some intentions lead to short-term happiness, but then long-term pain. Others lead to long-term happiness, even though they may be difficult in the beginning. That’s the real test of your wisdom. Not only sensing that, but also, once you know it, learning to overcome your lack of likes and dislikes. Even if something you’d like to do seems pleasant in the beginning but you know it’s going to give long-term pain, how do you talk yourself into not doing it? That’s a function of wisdom as well. Or if something is difficult, how do you talk yourself into doing it when you know that it’s going to lead to long-term happiness and pleasure? The strategic part of all this is a part of wisdom. If your wisdom can’t be strategic, then it’s pretty useless. You may know a lot of things, but if you can’t use them to bring about true happiness, they’re just decorations for the mind. They’re not anything that serves any real purpose. So as you come to the practice, try to approach everything as a question of skill. Be the sort of person who likes developing skills, who finds it an interesting challenge. Because that way of looking at things will take you all the way to the goal. And there is a goal. We’re not here thinking that the path itself is the goal. This is a path that goes someplace. This is an important part of developing a skill, realizing that there are things you really want. There are things that are really worth putting an effort into. And you don’t get overwhelmed by how large or far away the goal may be. Break the task down into small, manageable bits. This breath, and then this breath, and then this breath, and then this thought, this intention. Take them one by one. Look at whatever situation you’re in and figure out what’s the skillful thing to do right now. And the sensitivity and the understanding that you develop in approaching things in this way, that’s the path. That’s the way to the end of suffering. And if you can manage to enjoy the idea of developing a skill, that’s what will take you to the goal.

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